Cinema History III: 1960-1990

Paper 2

Adina Glickstein

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New Sensory Frontiers: Cinesthetic Sensation in *Aguirre* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*

In stark contrast to the idealism of the preceding decade, the 1970s represented a moment of mass disillusionment—a shift towards skepticism regarding nationalistic bravado, in America and abroad. While the United States reckoned with military failure and needless bloodshed in Vietnam, German national identity continued to reverberate with echoes of the Holocaust, characterized by ongoing fear of authoritarianism. A searching moral inventory of the cultural mythologies that had justified national expansion into new frontiers—from America's project of Manifest Destiny to the German quest for *lebensraum*—was in order, offering critical terrain for a new generation of filmmakers. Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972) offer two paradigmatic examples. Both are contemporary re-thinkings of mythologized national pasts, centering on male protagonists whose desire to conquer a new frontier is coldly rebuked. Extending beyond the narrative register, this criticism is woven into the films' form: through their intense stylization, both convey a sense of affective intensity, encouraging a mode of engagement between viewer and film that extends the entire embodied sensorium. This multi-sensory approach, in step with the postcolonial theory that began to emerge in the 1970s, critiques the occularcentric sensory regime associated with the will to mastery—and, by extension, with the colonial projects the films depict.

Cinema's earliest years represent the uncontested domination of a new frontier of the visual: with the advent of the motion picture camera, humans could, for the first time in history, record images in duration. As Paul Virilio has proposed, the invention of cinematic technology has, from the outset, been bound up with the development of new weapons: the cellulose nitrate base of film stock was originally used as a powerful explosive on the battlefield, just as the earliest prototypes of the motion picture camera evolved out of Étienne-Jules Marey's prototype of the chronophotographic rifle, an early machine gun (115). The traces of this history, evident in the language of "shooting" a film and "capturing" images, are telling: cinema offered an unprecedented way of recording the world, with the will to dominate—or at least understand it—always just below the surface. These desires were often mirrored within film narratives through the 1950s, as the popularity of stars like John Wayne signified "a particular vision of the white male body: able, kinetic, efficient, and ultimately superior" (Meeuf 59). The massive success of such figures underscored the public's receptivity to the more agreeable, if tenuous, narratives of American history: that the West was won, so to speak, by the bravery of robust settlers who overtook new frontiers to bring prosperity and civilization.

As the twentieth century unfolded, however, this idealized vision of America's history and purpose became increasingly untenable. The years after World War II saw vast support for interventionist foreign policy—essentially an extension of the settler-colonialist mentality—but as this eagerness to intervene led to the "Vietnam quagmire," the wisdom of this policy was sharply brought into question. "Vietnam demonstrated that, for all its military might, the United States could not enforce its will unilaterally across the globe," writes Lester D. Friedman. "After all, how 'super' was a power that could not even stop the spread of communism in a small and

relatively inconsequential country in South Asia?" (10). The public revelation of America's failure in Vietnam, facilitated by the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, inaugurated the '70s as a decade of skepticism towards earlier, more idealized beliefs in the nation's power. Not only was America fallible, it was also willing to shed civilian blood in defense of an empty self-evaluation rife with nationalist, capitalist bravado.

Simultaneously, a similar skepticism fomented abroad as the mid-20th century's decolonization gave rise to postcolonial theory, articulated by Edward Said with the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978. In Germany, public suspicion over a return to authoritarian tendencies following World War Two gave rise to a radical left-wing seventies counterculture (Hake 154). Through the 1970s, auteurs like Herzog, Wenders, and Fassbinder were able to rethink the problematic idea of *Heimat*—homeland—in the context of a search for contemporary German identity: the new national cinema, emerging in the wake of the Oberhausen Manifesto, offered a rare medium for critical, non-reactionary reflection on the questions of community, society, and nation (160). These concerns extended beyond the United States and Germany: amidst the shadow of two devastating World Wars and the burgeoning attempt to repair colonial violence, it became increasingly indefensible for any nation to narrate its own history uncritically. The unsavory history of manipulation and dispossession on which the West was built came to light, and could no longer be ignored. This might be summarized by suggesting that the 1970s saw the destruction of the mythology of the frontier, encouraging a critical reevaluation of the will to domination associated with it.

Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, released in 1971, is an exemplar of this reevaluation. The film employs several of the tropes made popular by John Ford's iconic west-

erns—but with a critical twist, revealing the vacuity and violence at the heart of America's westward expansion. This is evident from its opening scene, where the titular "hero" (Warren Beatty) rides across an unforgiving landscape, his body nearly unrecognizable under layers of suffocating furs. The camera pans across the terrain, lingering on the trees before McCabe is even revealed; when he does come into view, he is depicted from a high angle, making him appear diminutive against the expanse of forest. The sense of bleakness is heightened by Altman's Panavision lens (with a staggeringly wide 2.40:1 aspect ratio) and low-contrast film stock, achieved by "flashing" the negatives before shooting. In a break with westerns past, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* takes place in the winter, set against the vast accumulation of glittering snow. Coupled with Leonard Cohen's melancholy songs, this opening scene stands in stark contrast to the kinds of establishing shots that introduced viewers to John Wayne some decades earlier. Where the traditional western hero was characterized by his infallible machismo, McCabe is vulnerable.

Throughout the film, it is McCabe's business savvy, rather than his physical stamina, that enables him to navigate the unforgiving terrain—and eventually brings about his downfall. Establishing a brothel in a lethargic mining town, McCabe achieves financial success and brings about broader prosperity. But when a mining company attempts to buy the land on which the town is built, McCabe overestimates his business acumen, declining their offer despite rumors that the company's owner frequently kills those who refuse to sell. As a showdown with the company's bounty hunters occasions the town's destruction—including the burning of the Presbyterian church for which it is named—the real mechanism of westward expansion becomes visible: not vigorous masculinity, but capitalist brutality. Rather than ending with the one-on-one duel of the conventional western, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* closes as McCabe is outnumbered,

shot, and dies in the snow. The complacent, happy ending of earlier westerns is foreclosed, updating the genre's established tropes to fit the disillusionment of the 1970s.

What *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* revealed about the myths of the American west, Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) demonstrated for colonialism more broadly. Starring Klaus Kinski as the notorious conquistador Lope de Aguirre, the film reveals European conquest as a hubristic conceit. As with *McCabe*, its critical reading of history is evident from the outset: the opening image—jagged mountains eclipsed by fog—gives way to a tracking shot across a perilous slope. Several figures, shot from a high angle and dwarfed by the scale of the mountains around them, are barely visible; each time the camera zooms close enough for their outlines to resolve, it cuts away, precluding a meaningful glimpse. After two full minutes of this teasing, the figures finally come into clear view. They struggle up the mountain, performing inhuman feats of physical exertion as they navigate the treacherous path. Some, established as natives by their indigenous dress, are in shackles. Their captors, a group of Europeans in ponderous and incongruous outfits, seem oblivious to their surroundings, driving the natives forward despite the possibility of death at every misstep.

As the film unfolds, it stages the disillusion of this fantasy of control. The group of conquistadors navigates a river in search of El Dorado, repeatedly set back by attacks from both nature and natives. The power-hungry Aguirre leads an uprising against the expedition's commander, bludgeoning the crew into submission. But his rule is jeopardized as supplies for the crew's shared raft quickly dwindle at the hand of a gluttonous king, and the men grow feverish. Delirious with hunger and illness, the crew is unable to proceed, and die off one by one at the hand of arrows shot from offscreen. Aguirre, unhinged, is the last survivor on the raft, overtaken by a

swarm of tiny monkeys. He grabs one, lifting it like Hamlet with the skull of "poor Yorick," and proclaims himself "the Wrath of God," sent to "found the purest dynasty the world has ever seen" and "rule this entire continent." As he waits for the monkey to respond to his decree, the camera begins to circle the raft while hypnotic, revelatory music plays in the background. As the camera's circles grow tighter, the raft's decimated state is emphasized: parts are underwater; the structure is in disrepair; corpses are scattered indiscriminately. Where Aguirre sought conquest, the final scene enacts the opposite: a reversion to the state of nature, spiraling into disorder.

In this sense, both *Aguirre* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* share a narrative strategy: undermining received ideas about the domination of new frontiers, consonant with the disillusionment and skepticism that characterized the 1970s. While the frontier was previously imagined as the locus of Euro-American masculinity's triumphant assertion, these films demarcate a shift—the brutality of nature reveals this fantasy as a farce. But what makes these films truly masterful is their integration of this critique into the very fabric of their form: in addition to telling stories that underscore the hubris of the West's will to domination, they exemplify innovative ways of seeing that further critique the drive to dominate. With their rich sensory texture, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Aguirre* are not just to be seen—they are to be *felt*, evoking Vivian Sobchack's description of "cinesthetic" spectatorship, wherein "we see and comprehend and feel films…informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (63). Through their heightened stylization—especially in depicting the natural world—both films invite an embodied, affective response from the spectator, drawing on the wealth of sensory possibilities extending beyond sight alone.

Throughout *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the abject, bodily details of life in the West are prominently foregrounded. Unlike the immaculate, playful prostitutes that often appear in traditional westerns, the working women of Presbyterian Church are unwashed and unforthcoming, especially early in the film before Mrs. Miller helps McCabe expand his brothel. As he joins her to talk business over dinner, he drinks a double whisky with a raw egg—a feat that he performs repeatedly throughout the film, eliciting a shudder from the viewer as we consider the taste of the concoction. Asserting her competence while they negotiate, Mrs. Miller remarks to McCabe: "If you want to make out like you're such a fancy dude, you ought to wear something besides that cheap Jockey Club cologne." The olfactory texture of the scene—body odor, alcohol, raw eggs, and cheap cologne—is practically assaulting to the spectator. The choice to set the film in winter adds another layer of sensation: the viewer can nearly feel the bone-chilling cold of the frontier as the sound of the wind and subtleties of characters' physical motion work in concert. Perhaps the most prominent sensory appeal in the film comes from Altman's use of sixteen simultaneous audio tracks, layering natural sounds and unintelligible background dialogue to approximate the aural experience of real life. The viewer's attention is drawn in multiple directions at once: we must listen closely for the subtleties of sound design, track the meandering narrative, and take in the lush visual detail—a symphony of sensory input more akin to embodied experience than the flat emphasis on visuality one might find in a less masterful film.

Likewise, *Aguirre* draws its power from heightened sensory appeal. Herzog—who once publicly proclaimed his desire "to be a gravedigger of cinéma vérité"—avows that his goal as a filmmaker is to divine the "ecstatic truth" of mankind (Zalewski 20). His aesthetic sensibility is remarkable for its embrace of the sublime, which he evokes by foregrounding extreme situations

(Hake 157). *Aguirre*'s invocation of the ecstatic and the sublime underscore its sensory charge, allowing the film to convey an affective linkage to the viewer. The sense of physical danger that persists through the film encourages the viewer to respond to the narrative's contours with embodied intensity: each time the band of conquistadors nearly slips off the mountainside with the incorrect placement of a step, the viewer can feel it in their nervous system before the action resolves. The lushly stylized landscape heightens the physical vulnerability of Aguirre's men as they are repeatedly struck down by arrows flung from offscreen, creating a heightened sense of danger that the viewer comprehends on the level of intuition. This recalls Deleuze and Guattari's description of *the haptic*: "a space that must be moved through by constant reference to the immediate environment, as when navigating an expanse of snow or sand" (Marks xii). The terrain is to be navigated, but cannot be mastered. To further this effect, Herzog employs sophisticated sound design that fully engages the viewer's sensorium. *Aguirre* is punctuated by the music of a choir organ, a keyboard that artificially replicates the sounds of a human choir. This uncanny music—not-quite-human, but unsettlingly close—further sets the viewer on edge. The invocation of the sublime in these natural landscapes rejects the possibility of mastery, which—alongside Herzog's heightened stylization—invites an anxious and unnerved mode of spectatorship that links the viewer to the sense of embodied uncertainty experienced by the characters.

The heightened sensory engagement common to both films is not only conducive to poetic filmmaking, but also ontologically meaningful: it rejects the organization of the senses favored by Western liberal history, which Martin Jay terms "occularcentrism" (3). From the Enlightenment onwards, vision was considered the most remote sense, and, correspondingly, the most intelligent: Descartes proclaimed it "the noblest of the senses," divorced from the low realm of ma-

terial being (21). This intensified with the development of perspective in Renaissance art, which codified the belief that verisimilitude was to be achieved by structuring a painting around the eye of the beholder (Berger 16). Modern subjectivity was defined by the privileging of sight at the expense of the other senses, which were thought to be base or uncivilized. As postcolonial studies developed in the 1970s and animated a critical reevaluation of Enlightenment thought, a new question came to the fore: how might the occularcentric sensory regime be associated with the same will to control that underpinned the settler colonialist project? And, correspondingly, how can cinema—indisputably, a visual art—resist this occularcentric tendency?

Feminist film critics such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha have described the Cartesian emphasis on visuality in conventional filmmaking as one that "objectifies others, isolates self from others, and attempts to master external and internal worlds" (Marks 133). The haptic and cinesthetic qualities of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Aguirre*, then, might be read as a strategy for rejecting the will to domination of which their plots are so critical. The evocation of an embodied sensory experience, which engages the entire human sensorium rather than privileging sight alone, serves as another layer of defense against the settler-colonialist mentality that enabled the West's rise to prosperity. As these films' protagonists are rebuked in their quest to control new frontiers, their sensory texture destabilizes the occularcentric ideal—quietly operative throughout much of film history—that reinforces the viewer's visual mastery. Instead, they draw on the viewer's full range of sensory experience, making them both politically *and* poetically impactful.

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